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THE ECONOMIC STRUGGLE WITHIN THE MINISTERIAL PROFESSION

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It may be taken for granted that few men enter the Christian ministry from selfish motives. Were it merely a question of making money, the Christian ministry, as a vocation, would receive no consideration. For the young man who enters the ranks of the clergy is under no delusion in this particular, at least. Big financial returns are not expected. On the contrary, a certain amount of self-denial is anticipated. It is this devotion to Christian idealism that sustains him through those long years of preparation for his life's task. While his friends are establishing themselves in the business world, he abandons himself to four more years of grind and poverty in the hope of adequately equipping himself for the work that lies before him.

Once in the actual ministry, however, the young minister's purposes often suffer in an unexpected way. So subtle is the transformation that comes over him that the change takes place before he is aware of it. He leaves the seminary for a position that pays a mere pittance, and soon discovers that it will take years of self-denial to free himself from the debts accumulated in school. True, he had not anticipated that the profession would be a bed of roses. But he had failed to realize the amount of strength and courage it takes to sacrifice in the midst of abundance. Were his lot cast among those less fortunate than himself, he would endure his privations without complaint. But he finds himself among a people who are comfortably situated, or who have, at least, some prospect of prosperity. Soon he finds himself raising the question, "Am I justified in sacrificing myself in the midst

of plenty, and for a people who can well afford to pay me a living wage?" The question becomes more acutely felt when he finds himself obligated to provide for a wife and children. Where is the parent of moderate means who does not wish for his children greater advantages than he himself enjoys? And a minister is not unlike the rest of men in this respect. He feels responsible for his family's well-being, and wishes to save them from all unnecessary privations. What would happen to those he loves should permanent disability or death overtake him? From whence is coming the money to pay for his children's education? How can he provide against the monetary ills of old age?—are among the thoughts constantly uppermost in his mind. In short, the young minister's idealism is threatened by the economic factor.

There is another cause that even more seriously affects a young minister's purposes. A little distance away a minister of the same denomination is drawing a salary considerably larger than his own. The question immediately suggests itself, "Why should I be content to live on a mere pittance when larger salaries are to be had?" The Christian ministry offers as many opportunities for advancement as any other profession. There are within most denominations all varieties of churches, paying from starvation wages to competent stipends. Why should not the young minister of meager salary qualify for a better paying position? Why should he not make his present charge a stepping-stone to something more remunerative? Is he not justified in seizing any offer that may come to him (regardless of the opportunities for service that his present location may present) that promises escape from economic serfdom? In a word, his temptation is to sacrifice his Christian idealism to economic expediency. Of course, he still intends to make service his life's great purpose. But why can he not serve on a larger, just as well as on a smaller, salary? As a matter of fact, he has surrendered his ideal of disinterested service to material prosperity.

Once the young minister recognizes that he, too, is the victim of the competitive system, he will seek to discover, and to apply himself to, those methods and means that guarantee success. Experience will soon teach him that "quick returns" are of supreme value in the economic struggle in which he is engaged, and that tangible results in the form of increased money and members are generally accepted as signs of ministerial ability. For the minister who is able to show an increase in the membership of, and attendance at, every department of the church's activities under his care, and is able to raise the figures of his budget (especially for the support of his denominational machinery), is invariably pronounced successful. The quicker and greater his returns, the better chance he stands of favorable recognition.

What does this imply? It compels the young minister to enter into the keenest competition with the men, not only of his own, but of all denominations. His task is "to make good." But such is the task of every other minister. It is necessary, therefore, that he shall effectively meet the challenge of his fellow-competitors. By some means, fair or foul, he must attract people to, and interest them in, his own specific religious organization. Service becomes a secondary matter. He must learn the art of "catching" men for his own cause. To accomplish this, he must compete with every minister of the community in matters of advertising. Too much money is spent on advertisements to question its importance as a business asset. A well-established firm, organization, or profession may regard further publicity unnecessary; but to the obscure—or where competition is keen—advertisements are of vital importance. It is therefore the task of the minister to excel his brethren of the profession in the art of advertising. Nor can the young minister who is striving to further his personal interests afford to ignore the spice of novelty and variety. Novel methods, new "stunts," striking innovations, ingenious competitions, and pleasing variations are not

to be disdained if the curiosity of the crowd is to be aroused. Of course, after he has attracted the unattached (granted he is honest enough to refrain from proselyting), there still remains the sphere of personal qualities to capture for himself. He must tower above the rest of his fellow-ministers either as a speaker or in social qualities; preferably in both. Fortunate is that young minister who, in addition to the other demands made of him, finds himself both the best speaker and most popular man among the preachers of the community in which he resides.

But the young minister finds himself engaged in more than a local struggle; he must compete with the men of his own denomination. There are numerous churches scattered throughout the country whose doors remain closed. This is due to the fact that their members are unable to support a minister. When we come to the better paying churches, the supply is found to be more than equal to the demand. There are always a large number of ministers who are waiting for an opportunity to improve their financial status. And advancement for the obscure man rests almost entirely with the denominational official under whose charge he happens to be. There are denominations whose churches are privileged full autonomy in the management of their local affairs. These not infrequently select their ministers without consulting outside officials. To this class of church a young minister may be introduced and called through the recommendation of some friend. But until such time as he has won for himself a large circle of ministerial friends, or has achieved more than a local reputation, he must invariably look to his bishop or superintendent to recommend him to the consideration of other churches. It is, therefore, imperative that he should gain the approbation of those upon whom his chances for promotion depend. Ignoring all evidence of favoritism—found in church as well as all other relationships—our young friend must attract the attention of those under whose charge

he is. Here again, as in the case of the local situation, "numbers" are of primary importance. There lies on my desk as I write an official questionnaire relating to the Easter Membership Campaign now established as an annual custom in many of our Protestant churches. The information desired is, in brief, "How many members did you take into your church Easter Sunday? How many on Confession of Faith? How many by letter? And what were the methods used to secure these results?" However far removed the purpose of these questionnaires may be, the work of the young minister, as he answers or refuses to answer these questions, goes on record. "Results" are made the test of his winter's endeavors. The young minister knows that these returns are pouring into the office of his superintendent and that he must submit a glowing report if advancement is to be known. He is also fully aware that in his efforts to impress his denominational leaders with the merits of his claim to preference, he is competing with the rest of his brethren of the ministry, especially those belonging to the class receiving a stipend comparable with his own. Nor is this all. If his financial status is to be improved, the young minister must get behind all denominational programs, however unreasonable or exorbitant some of them may appear to be, and support his denominational machinery. The denominational machinery must of necessity depend upon the loyalty of the local church for its existence. Consequently, the local church is asked to share with the rest of the churches of the body politic the expenses incurred in extension work, missionary enterprises, educational activities, and in the general upkeep of the larger organization. Now the bigness of the machinery depends on the number and size of the churches within the sect in which it operates. The demand made of the local church is determined by the size of its budget. The funds at the disposal of those in office depend on the number of active churches within the denomination. The economic struggle is now more than

local. It has to do with sectarian competition in the widest sense. Sect is pitted against sect in its endeavors to capture new territory or to maintain and to expand the work already established. And the size of the denominational budget determines the number of its high-salaried official positions; for the greatness of responsibility involved in any office must be met by equally great ability, which, in turn, must be correspondingly remunerated. It is in the interests of sectarian officialdom, therefore, that the machinery shall not only be kept going, but that the denomination shall enlarge rather than diminish. Sectarian officials, too, are caught in the thrall of the competitive system. The denomination they serve must hold its own against the aggressiveness of other religious bodies, and, if possible, strengthen its position even at the expense of all other sects. And in the economic struggle in which the denomination is engaged, the sectarian official must rely on the local pastor for support. He depends on him for the execution of his programs and to raise his ever growing budgets. And the young minister knows that if ever he is to gain favor in the eyes of those above him, upon whom his welfare so largely hangs, he must meet their requirements, however exacting. "To make good" involves substantial increases in the church's contributions for the wider denominational program and activities. Insurgency may be tolerated in one who is too well established to be either hindered or destroyed; but the young minister soon learns that loyalty to the denominational machine pays better than open criticism or revolt.

Several obvious evils resulting from this economic struggle as found in organized religion may be briefly stated. In the first place, the young minister is tempted, if not compelled, to sacrifice quality in his work to quantity. Many learn from bitter experience that such a thing as a thorough training of a group of young people for Sunday-school work does not count. It is not one of those things that looms up conspicu-

ously. Nor is there any special merit attached to the task of drilling a young men's class or a congregation in the practical application of Christ's teaching—teaching that will not only stand them in good personal stead, but will make for a better quality of Christian living, especially as it affects their human relationships. The young minister discovers that such service is at a discount in the economic struggle in which he is engaged. During at least the early years of his ministry, he cannot afford to lay out extensive and carefully evolved educational plans which require a period of years for their execution. His own economic struggle, as well as the demands of the church he serves, necessitate plans and methods that, in their working, bear evidence of progress. His primary task is to enlarge his membership rolls—church, Sunday school, young people's society, etc.—to fill his church pews, and to increase his church budget. These are the things that count to his advantage. And oftentimes he so far forgets himself in his anxiety to give evidence of his worth as to violate the common ethical principles of honesty, truthfulness, and justice. He practices the shrewdest methods of the business world; never fails to take an undue advantage of a fellow-minister; succumbs to schemes of wholesale proselyting; and perverts all ethical sense in his efforts "to succeed."

The effect of the competitive system on the local church is no less pernicious and pronounced. In the first place, each church is out to procure the best possible man "in the market." It is not considered unethical for a church to hold out every inducement to persuade a minister to resign his present charge in its favor. If the church with which it is competing is able to raise its price, or the minister is unwilling to relinquish his work for the advantages offered him, then it must continue its quest in another direction. Churches not only recognize the right of a minister to further his material interests, but encourage him to do so by their own competitive methods. The young minister knows that if his work does

not show numerical gains, he will be asked to resign. He also knows that if ever he is to be invited to a better paying pastorate his record of ministerial achievements must be satisfactory. Nor is this all. His work is judged by the conditions existing in the other churches of the community. If the church which a man serves is not enjoying as great prosperity as a neighboring church (apart from the methods used in securing that prosperity), his whole work is in danger of being underestimated, depreciated, and discredited. His congregation grows restless and dissatisfied, and eventually calls for his resignation or removal, as the case might be. It is immaterial whether or not he is doing a more permanent piece of work than the minister whose prosperity they admire. Results, quick returns, are the things principally insisted upon in religious work; for these are made the standard and test of progress. Consequently, the most prevalent demand made of the modern minister is that he shall be a good business manager in the sense that the money expended on the institution in his charge must prove a profitable investment. He is called upon to compete successfully with the rest of the ministerial business men of the community. To be and to do this, he must possess all the qualifications of a good business manager. He must be neat in appearance, a good mixer, an expert organizer, an adept advertiser, qualified to run every department under his care, tactful, sociable, and jolly, especially with the young people, and an entertaining talker. An expert knowledge of the Bible, a broad outlook on life, an uncommon insight into the deep things of God, and a sane interpretation of life's varied problems are not urgent as long as these other requirements are met. The quality of a minister's work and message is, alas, too often sacrificed to pretentious statistics. And sooner or later the church suffers from the system under which it exists. We have reference now specifically to the smaller churches. They suffer from short pastorates. The same competitive method by which they secure a minister is respon-

sible for his quick departure. No time is allowed for a piece of good, educational, constructive work. Oftentimes they suffer from "watered stock." They carry a bulk of worthless material—people who are a hindrance rather than an asset to the church's life. In their anxiety for "quick returns," they lower the standard of Christian discipleship, depreciate the value of Christian fellowship, and make church membership perilously easy. All these things have a demoralizing effect on Christian living and the moral life of the community in which they are found.

Two panaceas have been offered during recent years for the ills of the competitive system as found in organized religion. A great deal has been written and said on the overchurched community. On the assumption that there are such communities, a process of elimination has been urged whereby only such churches shall be allowed to exist as are able to pay a minister a living wage. Personally, I have often questioned the moral right of religious leaders and journalists (men who, for the most part, live in large cities where they are within easy access of the church of their choice) to determine the form of creed and worship to which any person must of necessity conform. Undoubtedly, there has been too little recognition of, and attention given to, the fact of religious temperament in approaches to, and conclusions arrived at, on the question of religious organic unity. Observation has brought home to the writer the fact that when the religious temperament is not adequately provided for, efficiency results in moral and economic loss rather than gain.

There have also been, during recent years, serious efforts put forth by various denominations to secure a minimum wage for its ministers. No one questions the worthiness of such efforts. But a minimum wage does not solve the problem. As long as one minister draws a larger salary than another, the competitive system under which ministers and churches today exist, with all its concomitant ills and dangers, will

continue to menace organized religion. Neither a minimum wage nor schemes of federation can accomplish the end desired. The abolition of the system itself will provide the only corrective and cure so sorely needed.

One often wonders why the current zeal for social reform does not seek more definite expression in reform within the church. Perhaps nowhere has the social question received greater consideration during the past decade than in religious journals and conferences. One has grown quite accustomed to the ceaseless attacks made upon the flagrant inequalities and injustices of the present social order. Endless discussions have gathered round the question of industrial relationships; while, with increasing insistency, social wrongs have been denounced and the urgency of the social application of Christ's teaching passionately proclaimed. Facts and figures have been assiduously collected and widely distributed. Most congregations have been informed of the glaring, iniquitous disparities existing between the extremely rich and the extremely poor: conditions of wicked luxury and extravagances as contrasted with the grind, hardships, and privations of those existing at the opposite end of the social ladder. These things are discussed in every religious conference of today and receive no little publicity through religious journals; while there have been numerous religious commissions appointed during recent times to investigate social and industrial conditions for the purpose of advising the church what attitude it should assume toward some of the pressing questions of the hour, of disseminating facts, and of discovering possible remedies for those defects in our common life which are generally conceded to call for drastic treatment. With these discussions, publicity, and commissions most Christians are in full sympathy; in fact, they are widely felt to be long since overdue.

But the amazing thing is that it does not seem to occur to those religious leaders who are so ardently anxious to destroy the evils of the social system to deal with the flagrant inequali-

ties and obvious injustices of their own profession. A bishop will passionately denounce the wrongs of the social order and fervently urge the application of Christ's teaching to industrial relationships, while under his supervision are men whose strength is being sapped and spirits broken in their hopeless and unintermittent fight with poverty. And these are expected, nay, almost compelled, to support their bishop that he may live in comparative comfort and maintain the dignity of his high office. It may be true that there are not in the ministerial profession those appalling contrasts provided by the self-indulgent extravagances of the idle rich and the drab struggles of the extremely poor; nevertheless, the monetary disparities are too great and unjust to be ignored. The fact must be faced that there are men (and their number is not small) who are eking out an existence (they can scarcely be said to be living) on a few hundred dollars a year when, but a little distance removed, is the minister who is drawing as many thousands in the same length of time. Not infrequently the preoccupying thought as one listens to the declamatory discussions of the social question by high-salaried ministers is, "Physician, heal thyself!" The ill-paid pastor has qualified by his identification with, and experience of, the corrosive wear of poverty to speak on the subject. But there is something incongruous about the well-paid religious leader denouncing social inequalities and industrial wrongs when similar evils remain unremedied, nay, not even considered, within his own profession. Is it right or is it wrong for a religious superintendent to receive remuneration in figures of thousands while under his care are men who must meet the demands of life by the same figures in hundreds? Is it right or is it wrong for a missionary secretary to have enough and to spare while the minister and his family on the pioneer field are enduring all manner of hardships and privations? Is it not time the church faced some of these questions before she undertakes to eliminate the evils of the industrial world? For the church

and the Christian ministry of today are perhaps suffering as much as any institution or class of people from the evils of the competitive system. Its vicious demands tempt the young to place a premium on material success; subject the old to unnecessary strain and worry in their struggles to hold their positions; cause churches to compete with each other in their anxiety to procure the best man in the market for the money they can afford to pay; and hinder, in more ways than one, the progress of Christian unity.

Of course, it may be anticipated that any proposal of a standardized salary among ministers would be met by the usual arguments put forth in favor of the competitive system. The present order would be defended on the grounds that equality in wages would rob ministers of all incentive to do their best, and would tend to encourage laziness. The underlying confession of such an argument is that every clergyman is in the ministry for what he can get out of it. It was maintained in the opening paragraph of this article that the majority of young men entering the ministry are actuated by unselfish motives; if a minister loses his Christian idealism for disinterested service, it is largely due to the competitive system under which he labors.

The world from time immemorial has paid homage to exceptional brains and ability. It has placed those possessing them in high office and felt in duty bound to reward them in accordance with the bigness of responsibility and tasks borne by, and entrusted to, them. And the church has accepted the custom of the world in this respect. But surely the standards of the church, where all men are supposed to be dedicated to the one common cause of disinterested service, should be different from those of the world. There is no New Testament evidence that God has placed a premium on brains and ability, or rewards men according to their material achievements. As co-workers with God, the New Testament presumes that each minister will do his best as opportunity and

gifts are granted to him. It teaches that privilege and talents are trusts that must be zealously safeguarded and liberally used. The only merit accorded to possession is the privilege of the larger responsibility and service it affords. As co-workers, the master is not above the servant, nor the servant above his lord. The harvest results from common effort, and its rewards are mutually enjoyed. And such teaching is not infrequently made the basis of appeal for Christian service. The humble worker is encouraged by the thought that his contribution, however small, is of equal worth in the eyes of God to the greatest contribution He receives. Then why not apply the teaching to the material rewards meted out to Christian service? It may not be through any fault of his that the missionary lacks the ability to fill a high executive office. But is it not enough that he is making his contribution to the common cause, and that upon his fidelity those in executive positions must rely for the execution of their plans and purposes? If a missionary gives his best, what more can even a bishop give? In the light of New Testament teaching, is it not, therefore, but just and honest that the work of the minister on the pioneer field be recognized as possessing a significance and worth equal to that of the missionary secretary who gives oversight to his work, and that he receive equal reward, material as well as spiritual, for a service of equal value in the eyes of Him whom they both serve?

Of course, it will be objected that those holding the more remunerative positions have greater expenses to meet; that the difference in salary is offset by the difference in their respective expenses. True; but how many ministers would be only too happy to relieve some of their brethren of the expenses incurred by clubs, banquets, committee meetings, and conferences, and to share the comforts of their higher standard of living, were they only privileged to do so. Such are some of the little inequalities of the Christian ministry, that while there are men who are glad to be excused from some of the

things to which they subscribe or for which they pay, others would most jubilantly take their place were they not debarred from doing so on financial grounds. Is it not a fact that, as a general rule, only the favored few are delegated to distant conferences, whereas the man who most needs the inspiration of these gatherings is rarely privileged to attend? Were the system different, one man would not be surfeited by intellectual and inspirational feasts while his brethren go hungry—as is now, alas, too often the case. And this apart from the difference existing between their respective standards of living. The present writer has often seriously questioned within his own mind whether it is in harmony with the spirit of Christ for a minister to enjoy a standard of living above that of the worst-paid member of the church he serves. Certain it is that were all professing Christians, laymen as well as ministers, unwilling to accept a standard of living denied to those of the same Christian fellowship, the social problem would be more than a subject for glib rhetoric, but would be faced with convincing seriousness.

Is it not high time the church faced some of the facts and evils of her own vicious competitive system? While she is emphasizing with increased insistency the need of applying Christ's teaching to social and industrial relationships, does she have courage to attack the economic wrongs of her own life? Would she not be in a better position to appeal to the conscience of the business world were she to set her own house in order first? For what success can she hope to have in taking the mote out of her brother's eye while a beam remaineth in her own?

However much men might disagree as to the practicability of any scheme of uniform salary for the Christian ministry, and however many apparently insuperable difficulties might prevent its general acceptance, this much may be said in its favor. It would eliminate much, if not all, of the inane, suicidal competition so commonly practiced today by ministers,

local churches, and even by denominations as a whole. Organized religion would exist solely for the sake of serving humanity rather than for the purpose of making humanity serve its interests, as, indeed, is only too frequently the case. The emphasis would be on quality instead of quantity; just as it should be if ministers and churches are to do permanent and worthy work. The small churches, more particularly, would be better served. Its pastorates would be longer, and the feverish restlessness now so widespread both among clergy and churches would be considerably lessened if not practically unknown. The church whose doors are now closed because of its inability to support a minister would be provided for; its pastor would be guaranteed a living wage. The particular forms of religious worship and government existing in a community would be the choice of the people themselves and would not be thrust upon them, as so often has been the case, by the aggressive policies of competing sectarian officials. The old heroic call to the Christian ministry would again be heard—the call to serve rather than to compete. Nor would men so readily leave the ministry; for there would not be that feeling so prevalent among the younger ministers of today that if they are to enter the competitive field they may as well be where the odds are greater and the struggle more worth while. And the man in the street would be more inclined to support organized religion. For he would have the assurance that the purpose of both ministers and churches is to serve rather than to get. But best of all, the church would be able to appeal more effectively to the conscience of the world to practice the spirit of unselfishness in business relationships having cleansed her own purposes of all unselfish motives. She would be in a position fearlessly to preach social and industrial righteousness as one who practices what she preaches.